

1 ORAL HISTORY OF: Judge Avern Cohn
2 INTERVIEWED BY: Charlotte Dubin
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4 LOCATION OF INTERVIEW: Jewish Federation
5 SUBJECT MATTER: Family, Community, Philanthropy,
6 Jewish Communal Service, Youth

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8 MS. DUBIN: I'm Charlotte Dubin. I'm conducting an
9 oral history interview with the Honorable Avern Cohn for the
10 Leonard M. Simons Jewish Community Archives, at the Max M.
11 Fisher Federation Building, on August 4th, 2004.

12 Judge Cohn, do we have your permission to use your
13 words and thoughts in the future for educational and
14 historical research and documentation?

15 JUDGE COHN: Yes.

16 MS. DUBIN: Start at the very beginning. Where and
17 when were you born?

18 JUDGE COHN: I was born in Detroit on July 23, 1924,
19 in St. Mary's Hospital. At the time, my parents lived on
20 Churchill, which is a street running parallel to West Grand
21 Boulevard off of Twelfth Street north of West Grand Boulevard.

22 MS. DUBIN: Who were your parents?

23 JUDGE COHN: My father was Irwin Cohn. He was a
24 Detroit lawyer. He was born and raised in Detroit. My mother
25 was Sadie Levin Cohn. She was born and raised in Chicago.

1 **MS. DUBIN:** Tell me about your grandparents.

2 **JUDGE COHN:** My father's parents were Samuel and
3 Molly Cohn. They were born in Poland. My grandfather came to
4 the United States in the 1890s. My grandmother followed
5 shortly thereafter. My grandfather, I imagine, began as a
6 peddler. But as far as I know he had a dry goods store on the
7 lower east side of Detroit. It's last location, I believe,
8 was Hastings and Winder. He retired in 1917, rather young,
9 and lived off the income of properties he owned on the lower
10 east side.

11 My grandmother was a housewife. They were both
12 Orthodox. My grandmother was considerably more observant than
13 my grandfather.

14 My mother's parents were Louis Levin and Rachel
15 Levin. They were born, I believe, in Lithuania. I'm not
16 sure. What is now Lithuania. My grandfather came to the
17 United States in the 19th century and he had a paper supply
18 business in Chicago. They both had a number of sisters and
19 brothers, as did my grandfather and grandmother on my father's
20 side.

21 **MS. DUBIN:** Can you tell me a little bit about your
22 growing-up years.

23 **JUDGE COHN:** My folks moved from Churchill to Glen
24 Court off of Twelfth Street in a two-family home. I have some
25 vague memories. They then moved to an area in Detroit called

1 Russell Woods at the corner of Fullerton and Petoskey where I
2 grew up from the first to ninth grade. I went to Winterhalter
3 Public School on Broad Street from first to sixth grade, to
4 Tappan Intermediate on American Avenue off of Tuxedo for the
5 seventh and eighth and first part of the ninth grade. Second
6 half of the ninth grade I went to Durfee Intermediate and then
7 three years to Central High School.

8 In 1939 my parents moved to Fairfield between
9 Pickford and Marguerita. It was from there that I commuted by
10 public transportation every day to Central High. I
11 characterize the area in which I grew up as the Golden Ghetto.

12 I started my Hebrew education at the Talmud Torah on
13 the corner of Tuxedo and Homer, where I used to go every
14 afternoon walking from Winterhalter to Tuxedo and Homer and
15 then home. I stoutly resisted learning anything in Hebrew
16 school. I went there until I was bar mitzvahed, although I
17 had a private tutor, as many did, for my bar mitzvah.

18 I completed my Jewish education at Shaarey Zedek
19 where I went to what was called Sunday school. Until my
20 grandfather died in 1936, I regularly attended Shaarey Zedek
21 and sat with him rather than the junior congregation. After
22 he died, I went to Sabbath services every Saturday as a member
23 of the junior congregation all the way through high school.

24 **MS. DUBIN:** You have a sister.

25 **JUDGE COHN:** I have a sister Rita. She's two years

1 younger than I am. Her education, secular and Jewish, more or
2 less followed mine although I don't think she ever went to
3 Hebrew school. She did go to Sunday school.

4 **MS. DUBIN:** What did you do for fun?

5 **JUDGE COHN:** Everything. I don't know. I was not
6 particularly adept at athletics. But my clearest memory at
7 Fullerton was riding a bike all over northwest Detroit. I
8 played ball in a vacant lot. I had an Erector set. I was an
9 avid reader. I had a modest social life and I did what
10 everybody else did. At Central High, 80 percent of the school
11 was Jewish. So for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur it shut down.

12 **MS. DUBIN:** You mentioned camp.

13 **JUDGE COHN:** I went to several different camps.
14 Camping then was different than it is now. I first went in
15 the Adirodacks where I celebrated my seventh birthday at camp.
16 So you can see how young I was. I went there for three years
17 and two months. As I recall, my folks didn't visit me until
18 the third year. A couple of summers I spent at Pine Lake
19 where my folks had a cottage. I then went to a camp in Maine.
20 Moden, which was an orthodox camp. I have very few fond
21 memories of that. I then spent a couple more summers at Pine
22 Lake, and then I went to Camp Tamawkwa in Algonquin Park for
23 three years, 1939, 1940, -1941. Eventually I went back to Camp
24 Tamawkwa after World War II as a counselor.

25 **MS. DUBIN:** Remember some friends?

1 **JUDGE COHN:** Oh, yeah. I don't think I have any
2 friends from elementary school that I can recall vividly. But
3 I have a number of friends from high school. I have breakfast
4 once every four or five weeks with Mel Ravitz, who was
5 president of my high school graduating class. Richard Sloan
6 was in high school with me. Others are around that were in
7 high school with me.

8 **MS. DUBIN:** Years later when you were receiving an
9 award, you mentioned to someone that you tied him to a tree.

10 **JUDGE COHN:** The one I can remember longest is my
11 former partner, Alan E. Schwartz. I was friendly with his
12 older brother, now deceased. In the summer of 1934 and 1935
13 they had a cottage at Pine Lake across the road from where we
14 lived. I tell the story that we're still friends,
15 notwithstanding the fact that his older brother and I, to get
16 rid of him one afternoon, tied him to a tree and walked off.

17 **MS. DUBIN:** You mentioned the observance of your
18 grandparents. Was tzedakah something that was important in
19 that home of yours?

20 **JUDGE COHN:** I can remember my grandmother always
21 had a blue box. My father, may he rest in peace, was always
22 active in the Jewish community. I can still recall those
23 years. He was a member of Mizrachi, which was a religious
24 Zionist organization. My father was observant. We did not
25 mix milk with meat in our house. We had only kosher meat at

1 home, although I didn't have to observe kosher when I was
2 outside the home and we didn't have two sets of dishes.

3 My father's parents died within three months of each
4 other in 1936. He went to synagogue and said Kaddish for
5 something like 15 months straight. Every morning and every
6 night. I don't think he ever missed a Kaddish. After that he
7 became somewhat more observant. As I recall my father laid
8 tifillin every morning.

9 As a young man he was a member of the board of
10 trustees at Shaarey Zedek. He helped found Adat Shalom, and
11 he was generally very close to the orthodox community although
12 he was not orthodox himself. I think that was reliving his
13 youth, where he grew up in a very orthodox environment.

14 **MS. DUBIN:** You support a number of orthodox
15 organizations and synagogues, day schools, yourself. Is that
16 to honor him?

17 **JUDGE COHN:** Well, it's a tradition I picked up from
18 my father. Sort of continued. In more recent years, and
19 we're jumping ahead, I grew up at a time when a Jewish federal
20 judge was an important symbol to the total Jewish community.
21 When I first took the bench as the only Jewish judge, I sort
22 of continued I think, and I don't want to be presumptuous, in
23 that tradition. Today we have either five or six Jewish
24 judges. It's not the same judicial environment.

25 **MS. DUBIN:** Is there anyone out of your childhood

1 memories you can recall made a particular impact on you?

2 **JUDGE COHN:** Yeah. The one who had the most impact
3 that I remember with the greatest fondness was my high school
4 chemistry teacher, Louis Panush, who I stayed friendly with
5 all through the years after I left. Somehow having his
6 approval, his approbation, all through the years seemed to be
7 important to me.

8 **MS. DUBIN:** Was the subject that he taught something
9 that you chose?

10 **JUDGE COHN:** No. It was his presence in the high
11 school. He was faculty advisor to the science club in which I
12 was very active.

13 **MS. DUBIN:** Obviously your father made some
14 impression on you as well. Can you tell us a little bit about
15 him?

16 **JUDGE COHN:** He was born and raised in Detroit. A
17 graduate of Cass Technical High School, although it was not a
18 technical school then. He went to the University of Michigan,
19 practiced law in Detroit. From as far back as I can remember,
20 it was just assumed that when I grew up, I would go into
21 practice with him. There was never any doubt, any question.
22 As a matter of fact, growing up, I didn't know there was any
23 other university in the United States except University of
24 Michigan where he had gone to school.

25 I was always very close to him and my mother. They

1 were never as managerial as parents are today. I think in the
2 years I grew up the relationship of the child to the parent
3 was not as close as it seems to be today. Today there seems
4 to be more concern about what the child will do in terms of
5 the parents, parent relationship. I'm not sure in the three
6 years I went to high school my father even knew the courses I
7 was taking. There was more independence. That doesn't say
8 there was less love or less closeness.

9 **MS. DUBIN:** How did that independence show up in the
10 kind of child you were and the choices you made?

11 **JUDGE COHN:** There was more freedom. There was much
12 more community. I could walk to my grandparents in the early
13 years. Everybody lived in the ghetto. It was around Dexter,
14 Linwood then it shifted to the Seven Mile Road area. A large
15 dependence on public transportation because you could get
16 everywhere by bus. When I was growing up, if you looked at
17 the number of high schools, the consecrates, Temple Beth-El
18 for example, 80 or 90 percent were from Central High School.
19 Today if you look at a list, there may be 50 from 30 high
20 schools. The Jewish community today is much more spread out.

21 I remember growing up, my father went to the
22 synagogue every Saturday, but he'd go to a different one every
23 Saturday. We'd walk to most of them. You can't do that today
24 unless you're in small enclaves of orthodox that cluster
25 around the synagogues in Oak Park.

1 **MS. DUBIN:** You graduated from high school in 1941?

2 **JUDGE COHN:** No. I graduated in January 1942. I
3 immediately went to the University of Michigan. By that time
4 World War II had started. My father -- he did have this
5 influence -- he wanted me to get as much college education
6 under my belt as I could before I was drafted because it was
7 assumed when I graduated in January 1942 I would go into the
8 armed forces. Into the army, because I had bad eyes. By
9 January 1942 everybody my age knew that within a year, 18
10 months, unless there were some health reasons, they would be
11 in military service.

12 **MS. DUBIN:** Did that uncertainty affect you?

13 **JUDGE COHN:** No. We just waited for it. It was a
14 natural thing and there was a very little resistance. There
15 were a very few who resisted it, but it was just assumed that
16 that would be the natural course of things. That is what
17 would happen.

18 So I went to the University of Michigan. I went
19 that summer because they had full semesters then. That fall.
20 and along about January or February 1943, I got my draft
21 notice. I continued in school until two weeks before I
22 reported for military service. When the time came to report
23 for induction is when I dropped out. Everybody did that.
24 Every week someone was leaving the fraternity house and
25 selling his clothes. Following week, someone else would leave

1 and sell his clothes. Following week, someone else would
2 leave and sell his clothes. By the time I left in March of
3 '43 the size of the fraternity house went down considerably.

4 **MS. DUBIN:** What fraternity was it?

5 **JUDGE COHN:** Sigma Alpha Mu.

6 **MS. DUBIN:** What happened after you were drafted?

7 **JUDGE COHN:** I was in military service for three
8 years. I was fortunate. I took training in an infantry
9 replacement training center and then I was sent to the Army
10 Specialized Training Program. At that time it was anticipated
11 the war could last for a very long time. So they set up
12 college training units for engineering, pre-med, pre-
13 dentistry, languages. I was fortunate to get into an
14 engineering program. After I was in the program for eight
15 months they closed it down because they needed men as
16 replacements in anticipation of the invasion of Europe, and
17 the only reservoir they had were these young men in college
18 training.

19 There, I was fortunate to get into the pre-med
20 program because they continued the pre-medical because they
21 needed a flow of doctors if the war lasted a long time. So I
22 went into pre-med, completed pre-med at Stanford University,
23 and then waited for an opening at a medical school class for
24 eight months. That eight months I worked as a ward boy in an
25 army hospital carrying bed pans. Then went to medical school.

1 Then the war was over. Continued in medical school till I was
2 discharged, went back for six weeks and then dropped out, in
3 anticipation of going to law school.

4 So I was lucky. I was in the army, two years, 11
5 months and 15 days, and did not go overseas.

6 **MS. DUBIN:** Did you show any talent for medicine?

7 **JUDGE COHN:** No. My father's younger brother was a
8 doctor who I greatly admired. I thought maybe it would be
9 possible. I did what I was told in the army. They gave me an
10 exam, I took the exam, I passed the exam, they assigned me to
11 someplace. I took another exam, I passed, they assigned me.
12 I sort of went with the flow. I sort of resisted it but my
13 father told me I was a jerk to do so, so I continued. I do
14 remember he said if I complete pre-med and get to medical
15 school, I can buy a car. That was the incentive to continue.

16 **MS. DUBIN:** You never got the car?

17 **JUDGE COHN:** Yeah. Wasn't much of a car, though.

18 **MS. DUBIN:** You went back to the University of
19 Michigan.

20 **JUDGE COHN:** Yeah. At that time I was eligible to
21 go to law school. I did not have to complete an undergraduate
22 degree to get into law school. After World War II, any
23 Michigan resident who had 90 or more credit hours was admitted
24 to the law school. Before I was drafted and some of my
25 military service, I accumulated sufficient hours so I admitted

1 to law school. So I never got an undergraduate degree. Then
2 I spent three years in Ann Arbor in law school. Graduated
3 there in '49 and went to work for my father.

4 **MS. DUBIN:** Tell us about the path to the bench.

5 **JUDGE COHN:** Well, the path to the bench was
6 practicing law for 30 years and coming to a point in time
7 where I had established myself in the Jewish community. I was
8 a senior partner in a large law firm. I was active in the
9 general community, very active politically. There were five
10 positions available. There was a Democratic president, a
11 Democratic majority in the Congress, a Democratic senior
12 senator. A vacancy with no Jew currently on the bench, and
13 strong support from the political leadership and the Jewish
14 community. All the large contributors to the senior senator's
15 campaign. Support from labor because I had been active in the
16 liberal wing of the Democratic Party. Support from the then
17 mayor of Detroit. I was a strong proponent of affirmative
18 action. Merit selection committee, to recommend to the senior
19 senator, the chair of which was a close friend. I was close
20 to the senator's administrative aide, who I'd been very
21 helpful to. One of my partners in the law firm was very close
22 to the senator.

23 **MS. DUBIN:** What law firm was that?

24 **JUDGE COHN:** Honigman, Miller, Schwartz and Cohn.
25 The senator himself was not enamored of me. But

1 given that mix, he recommended me to the president. It was a
2 long complicated path. Everybody who becomes a federal judge
3 has a story to tell of how they got there. It just doesn't
4 happen.

5 **MS. DUBIN:** I think there were a couple other
6 appointments that you had prior to being --

7 **JUDGE COHN:** In the general community, yes. In 1963
8 I was appointed to the Michigan Social Welfare Commission by
9 Governor Romney. There was a vacancy on the commission. It
10 required a Democrat by law. My name was called to his
11 attention by somebody and I was appointed to that position.
12 That board was abolished after about nine months.

13 Then later in the early '70s, I lost out in the
14 presidency of the Jewish Community Council. I'd rather not go
15 into that story. Very complicated. As a consolation prize I
16 got a recommendation by the Jewish Community Council and its
17 leadership to Governor Milliken to a vacant seat on the
18 Michigan Civil Rights Commission, which had recently been
19 vacated by the retirement of the one Jew on the commission.
20 So I got that appointment. It was a consolation prize, to
21 make nice on me so I wouldn't -- for not getting the
22 presidency of the council.

23 I stayed on the Michigan Civil Rights Commission and
24 after about four years as chair, I had to resign because of
25 some change in ethics rules involving a member of a law firm

1 who practiced before the Department of Civil Rights.

2 Then I got an appointment of the Detroit Board of
3 Police Commissioners. I had some help in that appointment.
4 Peculiarly, my wife's then husband was very instrumental in
5 recommending me to the mayor for that position. So I served
6 on the Detroit Board of Police Commissioners four about four
7 years. So those were, I suppose, my secular appointments.
8 All during that period I was active in the Democratic Party,
9 principally as a fund-raiser.

10 **MS. DUBIN:** You oversaw a major change in the police
11 department, is that correct?

12 **JUDGE COHN:** Yeah. I was there during the period of
13 time when the affirmative action program was implemented and
14 indeed, quotas were established both for women, for African
15 Americans both in the officer level and command structure, and
16 I was a strong proponent of quotas, believing that you could
17 not have a substantially black African American community with
18 a police force that was mainly white. That wouldn't work. It
19 would look like an army of occupation. I think because I was
20 a member of the establishment, so to speak, as a senior
21 partner in a major law firm, advocating quotas, affirmative
22 action, et cetera, it gave more credibility to that position
23 than it might otherwise have had. It certainly caught the
24 attention of the mayor's eye. I had known him before. He
25 gave me a big boost in my judgeship. It also caused some

1 breakdown in some relationships in parts of the Jewish
2 community which were against affirmative action and people's
3 opposition to quotas.

4 **MS. DUBIN:** You had a lot of opposition from the
5 community at large?

6 **JUDGE COHN:** No. Selective portions. I was active
7 in the American Jewish Committee and I sort of lost my
8 interest because the committee wasn't as strong on affirmative
9 action as I was.

10 **MS. DUBIN:** Going back to the bench and some of the
11 interesting cases that have come up along the way, is there
12 any one in particular that stands out in your memory?

13 **JUDGE COHN:** Well, I've had three major
14 responsibilities. One, I put to bed the Detroit school
15 desegregation case. In its waning years I was the judge that
16 was assigned the case. I eventually made a finding that the
17 school district was now integrated and there was no longer
18 need for court supervision.

19 Second, I fortuitously got the first campus hate
20 speech case. University of Michigan imposed a restrictive
21 code on campus speech and I was the one that declared it
22 unconstitutional, violating the First Amendment.

23 Third, on a more technical side, I had one for five
24 years, pieces of major patent litigation involving the
25 intermittent windshield wiper, which brought me a good deal of

1 notoriety as a judge among a very small part of the community.
2 Every time I think of it, my head turns.

3 **MS. DUBIN:** You're known for your fairness as a
4 judge. What other qualities do you think a judge needs?

5 **JUDGE COHN:** I think I bring industriousness,
6 attention, hands-on management, a willingness to dig into a
7 case and try and understand the competing positions.
8 Sometimes I am rhetorically promiscuous, as I put it. I don't
9 hold a grudge and I try and bring out the best in a case so
10 that everybody gets a fair shot in expressing their position
11 and trying to come down without any ideological bent one way
12 or the other. You'd have to ask others about that. I'm the
13 last person in the world to explain the judicial persona as
14 the judge.

15 **MS. DUBIN:** This is your 25th year in the Eastern
16 District of Michigan.

17 **JUDGE COHN:** United States District Court for the
18 Eastern District of Michigan. There are 15 regular judges and
19 there's several senior judges. I'm a part of the group that
20 sit for the eastern half of the state of Michigan in the Lower
21 Peninsula.

22 **MS. DUBIN:** You've already noted that a number of
23 them are Jewish.

24 **JUDGE COHN:** Yes.

25 **MS. DUBIN:** Is there a tradition, perhaps --

1 **JUDGE COHN:** No. There was a tradition of a so-
2 called Jewish seat, a so-called Polish seat, so-called Italian
3 seat, something like that. An African American seat. But in
4 the last 20 years all of that has sort of disappeared,
5 particularly the Jewish seat. Five out of the 15 are Jewish
6 which is very disproportionate to the Jewish population, but I
7 don't think when each of these people, men and women, were
8 appointed, anyone gave much thought to the fact that they were
9 Jewish. That's no longer a consideration.

10 **MS. DUBIN:** As you mentioned, you chaired the
11 Michigan Civil Rights Commission. You've been honored as a
12 dedicated civil libertarian by the American Civil Liberties
13 Union, the American Jewish Committee and the International
14 Association of Jewish Lawyers and Jurists. In your father's
15 memory you chaired a Talmudic law seminar, a lecture series
16 for Jewish judges and lawyers. Do Jewish laws and values
17 figure in your decisions and views?

18 **JUDGE COHN:** Yeah, in a way. I'm not sure how. But
19 I think there's a tradition among American Jews of liberalism
20 and willingness. Brandeis once said to understand the other
21 fellow's position. Those are the values that are brought.
22 Although, in today's world there are a lot of Jewish judges
23 who are very conservative and they might say their Jewish
24 values led to their conservative positions.

25 I knew I grew up in a liberal political atmosphere.

1 Most of the people I worked with were Jewish. Now how to
2 explain that, I'm not clear. I'm not much given to
3 introspection. I've always been conscious of the fact that
4 I'm Jewish. So when I sit up there and make decisions to some
5 extent how I act, how I respond has an impact on the
6 credibility of the Jewish community. I still think people
7 look at me as an American Jew, not just an American.

8 **MS. DUBIN:** Let's talk about the Jewish community a
9 little bit. How and why did you choose to get involved with
10 the Jewish Federation?

11 **JUDGE COHN:** I've been thinking about that and I
12 can't really respond. After all, my earliest memory of a
13 charitable gift is at the cornerstone laying of Shaarey Zedek
14 at Chicago and Lawton, when as part of the afternoon, I
15 vaguely remember they had somebody with a hat or basket and
16 kids were running up putting dollar bills or quarters and
17 contributed in some fashion. I always remember taking money
18 to Sunday School, because every Sunday they passed the hat, so
19 to speak. I know when I was in law school I belonged to a
20 Jewish fraternity, Tau Epsilon Rho, and I can remember during
21 the campaign soliciting other Jewish students for
22 contributions, \$5 or \$10. So I started as a solicitor in law
23 school.

24 When I came back to Detroit, I was single. Other
25 friends were active in the Junior Division of the Allied

1 Jewish Campaign. I became active in the Junior Division.
2 That's where you met people. It was part of your social life.
3 In 1951 and '52 I went to Israel. When I came back each time,
4 I was one of the few people of my peers that had been to
5 Israel, so I was invited to speak about what I saw. After
6 that it was just part of my social life.

7 I continued to be active in the Junior Division. As
8 a member I got a position on the Board of the Hebrew Free
9 Loan. I think maybe for a year I was on the board of an
10 agency that used to meet in the upstairs offices by the Avalon
11 Theater on Davison and Linwood. Whoever had its office on
12 Davison and Linwood by the Avalon Theater building, I was on
13 that board for a while.

14 Then I got active in the Jewish Community Council.
15 I was very active in that for years, because it was an active
16 social organization, communal organization. There was an
17 Attorney Section of the Allied Jewish Campaign that I was
18 active in. A part of my life I was on the board at Shaarey
19 Zedek, which I didn't like. Being a trustee of a synagogue
20 wasn't for me.

21 I just continued and eventually I was on the Board
22 of Governors. At some point I got elected a vice-president of
23 Federation and much to my surprise in 1981 or '82, Marty
24 Citrin called me to his house one day. He said, I want you to
25 be president of Federation. It absolutely floored me. I

1 remember, I said, why me? He says, because your head's
2 screwed on straight. I think I really became president of
3 Federation -- I was the only person I know that became
4 president of Federation that had never been president of an
5 agency. Indeed, I had been defeated for the presidency of an
6 agency. I think it was a point in time where the officerships
7 of Federation were in a transition. They needed someone who
8 was safe and secure. And I was safe and secure, not apt to go
9 off on my own.

10 Sol Drachler was the executive vice-president. I
11 remember vividly going to Israel for a meeting of the general
12 assembly with him and talking about plans for my presidency.
13 Coming back, sitting in my office, getting a phone call early
14 one morning from Mike Zeltzer. He said, are you sitting down?
15 I said, yes. He says, I walked in this morning -- Mike at
16 that time was the head of the Foundation -- said, there was a
17 memo on my desk and a letter from Sol Drachler. He's resigned
18 as executive vice-president. I can't find him. So it was an
19 auspicious beginning of my presidency not to have a vice-
20 president.

21 We got together and agreed that Mike Zeltzer would
22 become acting executive vice-president and Bill Berman would
23 return as chair of the executive committee which he just left.
24 I would be president. Normally presidents go for three years.
25 I only went for two years. It got to be too much of a strain.

1 I couldn't handle my job as a judge and the presidency. At
2 the end of two years I suggested they elect a new president.

3 You'd have to ask others why I became president of
4 Federation, because I'm not sure that my record of Federation
5 activity really warranted it at the time, other than the fact
6 that I was a federal judge which added some prestige to the
7 office. The late Theodore Levin had been president for five
8 years and he was a federal judge. I was safe.

9 **MS. DUBIN:** You were president from 1981 to '83. In
10 those two years can you recall any particular challenges?

11 **JUDGE COHN:** I guess there was a war in Israel in
12 '83. We had an emergency campaign and we had to deal with
13 whether we would have an extra campaign, an add-on to the
14 campaign, and we had a couple of tense meetings with the
15 executive committee on Sunday mornings. I remember one
16 meeting we couldn't decide what we were going to do. I said,
17 we've got to meet again and we were trying to argue a date and
18 everybody had a different view of what date we should meet. I
19 finally just said we're meeting next Sunday morning at 10
20 o'clock and this meeting is over. We moved forward.

21 In that period I had to appoint a search committee
22 and we had to find a new executive vice-president. That was
23 Wayne Feinstein was chosen. I can remember vividly offering
24 it to him and then someone telling me, he wants to be
25 executive vice-president immediately. He doesn't want to wait

1 a year under Zeltzer. I looked at him and said if he doesn't
2 want to wait a year, he doesn't get the job. People argued.
3 I said, no, if he can't wait a year, we don't want him. So he
4 waited a year.

5 So I was always very definitive whatever decision I
6 made, whether it was a good one or a bad one. There was never
7 any doubt or vacillation. I've been good at that, I think.

8 **MS. DUBIN:** What do you think are the major
9 challenges that Federation faces today and the community?

10 **JUDGE COHN:** Well, the major challenges it faces
11 today is its contributor base is continually changing. It's
12 got to find replacements for large contributors. You find as
13 you grow older two things happen. You have fewer friends and
14 you take more pills every morning. This community is changing
15 and the demands locally are increasing. There's a heightened
16 consciousness of the need to support Jewish education in the
17 day schools. Day school education has become a big thing in
18 the community. I don't know how many children it actually
19 touches, but all of the day schools are flourishing in terms
20 of numbers, but they're not flourishing in terms of income.
21 I'm not that close, otherwise.

22 One time we had a big Jewish hospital in Detroit
23 that attracted a lot of attention and a lot of money. That's
24 now gone. We once had a Jewish children's home. When I was a
25 kid, my father was secretary of the Jewish Children's Home on

1 Petoskey. I used to walk down there and attend meetings with
2 him. Sit and read something while he was at the meeting.
3 That institution is gone. The Resettlement Service is gone.
4 We have many more synagogues than we had then.

5 Education is the big challenge. Maintaining a
6 viable Jewish community for the generations to come becomes a
7 challenge, I guess, but I'm not close. I don't go to board of
8 governors meetings. Although I'm a member, I don't go to
9 meetings. I don't go to any meetings anymore.

10 **MS. DUBIN:** You've supported Jewish education quite
11 a bit. The Jewish Theological Seminary, University of
12 Michigan Hillel, Cohn-Haddow Center Wayne State University for
13 Judaic Studies. So you obviously view Jewish education as
14 very important.

15 **JUDGE COHN:** Yeah. But each of those interests come
16 from a different direction. I think keeping Jewish
17 educational institutions viable is a priority in terms of my
18 giving. Others have other interests that they contribute to,
19 but that's the one I think is the most important.

20 **MS. DUBIN:** And orthodox education I think is also
21 important.

22 **JUDGE COHN:** Well, I was honored by some years ago
23 with the Yeshivah Beth Yehudah. In the course of my speech, I
24 said that the Jewish community is like a symphony orchestra.
25 The Orthodox community is the violin section. You can't have

1 a strong Jewish community without a strong Orthodox component.
2 As you move from Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, there's a
3 fall off, a sort of cliff that at the outer edges of the
4 community people keep falling off of. Inter-marriages,
5 disaffection, what other. You have to keep the core strong.
6 The core is the Orthodox community. The best of the Orthodox
7 community, not all. That's the central, the heart of Judaism.

8 **MS. DUBIN:** I believe you've made a significant gift
9 to the orthodox day school through the millennium campaign?

10 **JUDGE COHN:** Yes. I was asked to contribute at a
11 time the market was up and I was in a position to do so. I
12 hit upon that as the direction I would like it. It's the
13 Sadie Molly Cohn Fund, named after my grandparents. It's
14 apportioned out among orthodox educational institutions.

15 **MS. DUBIN:** Let's turn to Jewish history. A
16 particular interest of yours. You're the founding chairman of
17 the Leonard M. Simons Jewish Community Archives.

18 **JUDGE COHN:** Yeah. Because I was asked to be.

19 **MS. DUBIN:** The Irwin I. Cohn Cemetery Index.

20 **JUDGE COHN:** I get credit for that and that's really
21 a plus. That's an honor I don't deserve. I got a call one
22 day from Bob Aronson that they discovered among all of the
23 funds at Federation an amount that my father had given for
24 something that was unallocated. Would I have any objection if
25 they used it for the cemetery index. I said, no. My sister

1 should get as much credit for that as I should. Neither of us
2 should get any credit because it was my father's money that
3 was already here at Federation, that was sort of unallocated.

4 **MS. DUBIN:** In tribute to your father, you have
5 received the Leonard N. Simons Jewish History Award of the
6 Jewish Historical Society.

7 **JUDGE COHN:** Yes. Well, I have an interest in
8 history. I've always had an interest in history from the time
9 I was in high school. I have a particular interest in Jewish
10 history. On a couple occasions I was asked to give talks on
11 Jewish aspects of history. I did the research and put
12 together a talk. One was on Jews in politics in Michigan.
13 Second was the history of Jewish judges in Michigan. Of more
14 recent years, other aspects of the Jewish history of Detroit.

15 My interest, I don't deserve the sole credit. Judy
16 Cantor deserves as much credit as I do. On many of these
17 occasions she's the one that's pushed me or asked me to do
18 something. It's in response to her request that I've done it.
19 I'm not a self-starter.

20 **MS. DUBIN:** You mentioned your first trip to Israel.

21 **JUDGE COHN:** 1951.

22 **MS. DUBIN:** You've taken some trips since.

23 **JUDGE COHN:** I was there in 1951, 1952, 1963, in the
24 early '70s, twice in the '80s. I've been on three or four
25 missions. I now say that any time an airplane will take me

1 from Detroit to Tel-Aviv nonstop, I'll go.

2 **MS. DUBIN:** Why this particular interest?

3 **JUDGE COHN:** Israel is the homeland. There's
4 something that happens at least to me and I think to many when
5 they go to Israel. In 1951 we got there about three o'clock
6 in the morning. I was there with Richard Sloan. He left the
7 hotel early for business reasons, so I got up about 8:30 or
8 nine o'clock and started walking down a street in Tel-Aviv.
9 Even though I knew it was a foreign land, I thought I was home
10 because everybody I talked to was Jewish. Even if I couldn't
11 talk to them, they were all Jews. I think many American Jews
12 have a comfort feeling when they go there, because they're in
13 a solidly Jewish atmosphere. They're no longer in the ghetto.

14 You have to remember, until I was 18 when I got to
15 the army, I didn't have any Gentile friends. My whole life
16 had been associated with Jews. I didn't know the Gentile
17 world. It wasn't part of me. The only Gentiles I knew were
18 my teachers. You go to Israel, there's this feeling of being
19 at home.

20 I heard recently a lecture by Rabbi Darryl Wine, and
21 he has a line in it that we all met at Sinai. I think there's
22 a lot of truth to that.

23 **MS. DUBIN:** You were talking about your feelings
24 about Israel. You have more than a casual interest in law as
25 it is practiced in Israel and the Supreme Court of Israel. I

1 know that you have had contacts with them. I wonder if you
2 would have any comment about the way law is practiced in
3 Israel.

4 **JUDGE COHN:** I don't know how law is practiced in
5 Israel. All I know is that from my perspective, the thing
6 that holds the state together, because there's so much
7 contentiousness and diversity, is the high court because
8 everybody respects it. It has some aspects that we don't have
9 in this country. Any number of decisions that relate to the
10 management of the country are made by the high court. It's
11 very managerial.

12 A most recent example is when it directed Israel to
13 change the direction of the wall or fence or security barrier.
14 Everyone accepted that. In other aspects it is a very
15 political institution but on the other hand it is the only
16 apolitical institution in the state whose agenda, as I see it,
17 is the safety, security and welfare of the state. It has no
18 agenda, no axe to grind and is not competing for authority.
19 That also is in some part, in more recent years, a reflection
20 of the personality and the persona of the president in Ehud
21 Barak. Now how it would be when he has to retire at the age
22 of 70 in about two years, I don't know.

23 Naturally, as a lawyer and judge, interested in
24 Israel, I would gravitate to a particular interest in how the
25 judicial system operates. It's a natural adjunct.

1 **MS. DUBIN:** One of the most important aspects of
2 your life is your family. I wonder if you could tell me about
3 your family.

4 **JUDGE COHN:** I've been married twice now. My first
5 wife, Joyce Hoffman, died in 1989. We were married about 30
6 years. A very wonderful marriage. Sadly she passed away.
7 Three years later I married a family friend, Lois Patover
8 Pincus. I've now been married to her about 12 years. I have
9 three children. Sheldon, a very successful executive-producer
10 W.B. Donor of media. He has two sons. Jonathan and Jeremy,
11 11 and 7.

12 My daughter is married to Paul Magey, who's
13 president of a Adat Shalom. They have five children.
14 Harrison, Alicys, Bennett, Hannah, ranging from three years to
15 21.

16 I have a younger son Tom, who has a 2 handicap in
17 golf, which is very enviable. We're all close together.

18 I'm especially close to my grandchildren. I get a
19 lot of satisfaction out of spending time with them and I think
20 they get a lot of satisfaction out of spending time with me.
21 Since I have no particular hobbies other than reading, I spend
22 a lot of time with them. One on one, two on two. I've taken
23 each of my daughter's three older children, Harrison, Alicys
24 and Daniel to Europe, individually, just the two of us. For
25 the last three or four years at Thanksgiving I've taken

1 Sheldon's sons and two of Leslie's sons away. Last year we
2 were at the caverns. The year before we were at Mammoth Cave,
3 year before in New York City. This November I'll take the
4 four of them to Niagara Falls. I have yet to go one on one
5 with my daughter's three year old. Maybe that will change.
6 It will change eventually, but at this point she's not
7 interested in going with me one on one. Best I was to
8 accomplish, I took her last Saturday to lunch, but her two
9 brothers had to come along. Then she was happy to go.

10 **MS. DUBIN:** You would leave your children and
11 grandchildren quite a legacy. Are there some life's lessons
12 that you would pass on to them?

13 **JUDGE COHN:** No. I don't think about those things.
14 Whatever it is, it is. I don't give any thought to something
15 like that.

16 **MS. DUBIN:** Is there anything that we haven't talked
17 about or a question I haven't asked that you would like to
18 add?

19 **JUDGE COHN:** No, not particularly. You did ask me
20 to think about what three honors I've gotten that I was most
21 impressed with or I found the most satisfaction. That's the
22 only thing I thought about last night in anticipation, when I
23 looked at the list. You know, people honor you both because
24 of what you've done because they think you're a vehicle for
25 attracting people and raising money. Forget that. But the

1 three honors I've gotten overall that have given me the most
2 satisfaction is the Fred M. Butzel Award from Federation,
3 because this was in recognition of service to the Detroit
4 Jewish community.

5 **MS. DUBIN:** And your father also received --

6 **JUDGE COHN:** Yes. I think I was the first son of a
7 father to receive the award. So that gave me enormous
8 satisfaction.

9 The second was the Morrey Glazier Award, Michigan
10 Chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union. That was
11 satisfaction because that established my credentials as a
12 member of the liberal community.

13 The third was the most recent honor and that was the
14 theological seminary. Although I'd never been active in it at
15 all, I just knew of it. I knew one of the reasons they wanted
16 me was because they thought I would attract a large crowd.
17 The honor was given to both myself and my wife, Lois. We were
18 the joint honorees. Instead of my accepting the award, she
19 accepted it and gave a knock-out talk. Really wowed the crowd
20 with her comments. That gave me a lot of satisfaction, that
21 the two of us jointly honored, and the woman half of the
22 combination was the one that did the acceptance. Everybody
23 expected me to say something. I didn't say one word all
24 evening. She did.

25 Those three awards over the years. I don't really

1 look back much and think about past accomplishments. I think
2 about past cases only because I use them as examples to
3 lawyers when I'm trying to accomplish something with the
4 lawyers. But I'm not given to much introspection. I take
5 each day as it comes and I think I get along better that way.
6 What will be will be.

7 The other thing we haven't mentioned that I get some
8 satisfaction out of, is for the last five years every June
9 I've taken a canoe trip, first with my older and younger son,
10 and for the last three years with my younger son. This most
11 recent trip when the three of us went on the Mississippi River
12 in a 27 foot canoe with five people. The guide, two paddlers
13 and the two of us. I camped out on the islands of the
14 Mississippi River for two nights. At my age and with my back,
15 I considered that quite an accomplishment.

16 **MS. DUBIN:** Thank you. I wonder if you have any
17 photographs you would want at the end of this?

18 **JUDGE COHN:** No. Anything you've got around here is
19 fine.